

10,000 lbs. of produce: Urban garden's reward

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By Mike Blackerby

Just a stone's throw from downtown Knoxville – between the historic Mechanicsville and Beaumont neighborhoods – there's an unlikely urban community farm oasis tucked away amidst the hustle-and-bustle of the inner city.

Since 1998, CAC Beardsley Community Farm has supplied food and promoted educational opportunities, community gardens, outreach programs and a big helping of love to local food desert through the Community Action Committee.

“This is an urban demonstration farm,” explains Adam Caraco, Beardsley Farm's 34-year-old assistant director of urban agriculture. “We grow over 10,000 pounds of produce a year. We have over 500 different varieties of vegetables. If it can grow here, we grow it here. We have over 1,000 volunteers and we educate over 2,000 kids a year.”

Caraco says that the crops harvested at Beardsley Farm are in many cases the only fresh and healthy foods that many members of Knoxville's under-served community receive.

“Everything that we grow goes to different organizations,” he says.

Knoxville's pantries and kitchens, such as Mobile Meals, Knox Area Rescue Ministries, Global Seeds and the Family Crisis Center, are recipients of the farm's efforts. The farm's outreach programs extol the virtues of organic and sustainable gardening.

Caraco explains he gets tremendous personal satisfaction knowing that the fruits of his labor often end up on the plates of Knoxville's needy.

“I feel like the coolest guy around,” he adds with a laugh. “I tell people that want to know what I do for a living that I'm the gardening Santa Claus.”

Food deserts

Beardsley Farm was originally started almost 20 years ago to address food insecurity and provide a source of healthy, organic and locally grown produce for Mechanicsville residents.

Before the opening of the nearby Food City on the corner of Western Avenue and Middlebrook Pike in 2007, Mechanicsville was considered a food desert, an area without access to fresh produce, largely because of a lack of grocery stores, within a three-mile radius.

For those who depend on public transportation, or use bikes, traveling three miles or more to the nearest grocery store can be challenging, if not impossible. “It's hard to get fresh produce and healthy meals,” Caraco says, adding that parts of Knoxville are in “low-income areas and hunger is a real issue around here.”



More than 1,000 volunteers come together to produce 10,000 pounds of produce annually at CAC Beardsley Community Farm.

-- Adam Taylor Gash | The Ledger

Solstice Supper

Beardsley Farm, which is funded by the City of Knoxville and Knox County through the Community Action Committee, also relies on fundraisers throughout the year to sustain its myriad of programs.

The farm will hold its Solstice Supper fundraiser from 6-9 p.m. on June 21 at the Mill & Mine, 227 W. Depot Ave., in Knoxville.

Cocktail hour begins at 6 p.m. The vegetarian dinner will be prepared by OliBea's owner and chef, Jeff DeAlejandro, and chef Jessica Hammonds. Dinner will be served at 6:46 p.m.

The dinner will include Beardsley Farm's own produce and locally sourced ingredients. Tickets are \$75, a group of four is \$260 and a table of eight is \$500. Proceeds from the dinner will support the farm's mission to address food issues in Knoxville through produce donations, community gardening and educational outreach programs. Information: www.beardsleyfarm.org/events

The USDA has identified at least 20 food deserts in Knoxville and Knox County.

Down on the farm

Beardsley Community Farm almost has the feel of a 1960s, self-sufficient commune. On a small slice of the farm, a small army of bent-over mostly 20-somethings volunteers toil in the sun, harvesting hard-to-grow carrots and other crops on the six-acre facility in Malcolm-[Martin Park](#).

"I would say 85 percent of our volunteers are University of Tennessee students or Pellissippi (Community College) students," offers 23-year-old Jenna Bailey, the farm's volunteer coordinator.

More than four acres of the farm features patches of raised beds of crops, many neatly outlined by railroad ties and cinder blocks.

"If a vegetable grows in East Tennessee, we grow it, or I can almost guarantee you we've tried at some point," says Caraco, who adds that tomatoes – by weight or volume – are likely the

most-produced crop on the farm.

His, hardly all-inclusive, list of items grown on the farm includes tomatoes, carrots, okra, carrots, eggplant, lettuce, kale, collard and mustard greens, herbs, potatoes, peppers, apple trees and peach trees.

The farm also grows exotics. "Some of the things that are cooler, that we do, are pawpaws. There are not many people with pawpaw trees. It's the largest native fruit that grows in America, and tastes something like the midpoint between a banana and a mango."

The cluck of free-range chickens can be heard in one corner of the farm. The chickens serve a dual purpose, producing eggs and providing instructional hands-on education for children who come on a tour.

A pair of hives, buzzing with activity of course, are home to 60,000 to 100,000 honeybees. "Honey is one of the few things we sell that we produce from the farm," Bailey explains.

They also practice what they preach at Beardsley Farm.

Five large cisterns hold up to 8,400 gallons of rain water for reuse on the farm. Bins that feature vermicomposting, a composting process using worms, are scattered throughout the farm.

Education and more

Last year saw the opening of the Beardsley Community Farm's urban agriculture community education center.

The facility, which is LEED certified, provides much-needed accessible restrooms and enhanced parking, includes 1,200-square-feet of indoor education space and 1,800-square-feet of covered outdoor education space.

“This new facility will help the Beardsley Community Farm spread its roots in the community, with restrooms allowing for more field trips from school groups, churches, daycares and more,” Knoxville Mayor Madeline Rogero wrote in a 2016 city press release following the opening of the facility.

“The Beardsley Education Center will build our capacity to continue to teach important lessons on sustainable gardening and nutrition,” says Khann Chov, urban agriculture director at Beardsley Community Farm, echoing Rogero’s sentiments.

“The classroom and extended outdoor classroom will shield all visitors from extreme weather conditions; we can now host field trips, workshops and classes despite the weather and the season.”

Education is vital to the farm’s mission. Bailey says many area children that tour the farm have never seen where their food actually comes from.

“It’s nice to be able to pull something from the ground and show them you can grow this,” says Bailey, holding a freshly yanked carrot. “A lot of kids are shocked that a carrot comes from the ground. They think carrots come from a bag at the grocery store.”

Bailey is outgoing and dedicated about her work. Her passion resonates loud and clear. “I love the idea of growing food for people who don’t have equal access to healthy food.”

“Food insecurity is a real issue that not enough people talk about because they don’t see it. I love Beardsley a ton and am passionate about it. I wouldn’t want to work anywhere else.”

Two of Beardsley Farm’s most popular outreach programs are the Community Garden Program and the Green Thumb Program.

The Community Garden Program assists residents who do not have access to land. They establish community gardens in a variety of places, from city parks to public housing communities. Each year more than 150 residents are registered for garden plots and given technical assistance by Beardsley Farm staff.

The Green Thumb Program distributes free seeds and plants to more than 1,100 households in Knox County each year. Qualified applicants receive 12 types of vegetable seeds, nine tomato plants and nine pepper plants. They also receive gardening and nutrition tips.

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Jenna Bailey’s fascination with alternative food systems and the way food defines a community began while in college. Now, she’s able to pursue her passions of “ensuring food security, developing community, promoting sustainability, teaching environmental education and generally working hard for a cause I can believe in.”

-- Adam Taylor Gash | The Ledger